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Ten years after the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East

Historical roots, political transitions
and social actors

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**Asef Bayat, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday
Life of the Arab Spring*,
Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2021;
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222

In 2009, Asef Bayat published for Stanford University Press the seminal collection of essays *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Building on the notion of "nonmovement", the book offered a thorough exploration of the everyday practices of defiance and appropriation adopted by subaltern groups across the MENA/SWANA region to seize resources and spaces of freedom against oppressive regimes, sharpening economic inequalities, and patriarchal social norms, in the shadow of the profound changes impressed by the neoliberal transition.

The book challenged mainstream orientalist and exceptionalist understandings of the regional social order as immutable and quiescent to argue that, albeit widely unacknowledged by scholarship, the ensemble of «collective actions by noncollective actors» whereof he gave account were a prominent site of transgressive and cumulative social change. The salience of Bayat's argument revealed in all its importance about one year and a half later, as the explosion of the first wave of Arab Uprisings blatantly displayed to the global and scholarly audience the transformative power of the grassroots and the outstanding scope of the dissent that was silently smoldering among the subalternities who took the streets.

Against this historical breakthrough, in 2017 Bayat had already drawn a first balance of the meaning of the Arab Uprisings in the monograph *Revolutions Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford University Press, 312 pp.; ISBN: 9780804799027 Hardcover) where, comparing the Arab revolutionary momentum with the great revolutions of the 20th century, he sought to provide an empirical and theoretical exploration of the causes, nature, and characteristics of popular revolutions in neoliberal times. On that occasion, the focus was predominantly macropolitical and state-centric, with the aim of problematizing the forms and the implications of this new generation of revolutions "rich as movements but woefully poor as [regime] change". With *Revolutionary Life*, Bayat comes back to the social, the micro, and the grassroots, providing yet another empirically thorough and theoretically engaging exploration of the everyday dimension of the Arab Uprisings.

The monograph ideally closes the circle of the long scholarly journey inaugurated in 2009, to explore the unaddressed questions of what the revolution did to the grassroots and the everyday, and, *vice versa*, what the grassroots and the everyday did to the revolution. In so doing, the author aims at bridging the analytical disconnect between everyday-life as the realm of the ordinary and revolutions as the realm of the extraordinary, to present a new way of looking at the through the prism of the social. The book builds on a rich and heterogenous array of sources and methods of data collection (quantitative, qualitative, observational) largely benefiting from the author's pluri-decade direct experience and observation of the regional social world, and focuses on the cases of Egypt and Tunisia from the immediate pre-revolutionary momentum up to 2015. The subaltern groups at the center of the enquiry are the poor, marginalized youth, women, and, to a lesser extent, sexual minorities, whereof he exposes and analyzes the changing forms of everyday contentious engagement before (Chapter 2), within (Chapter 3), and after (Chapter 4, 5, 6 and 7) the uprisings.

The main argument and the theoretical framework of the work are presented in Chapter 1, and rely predominantly on Alain Badiou's definition of revolutions as "a condition of rupture in the routine of life that may give rise to open-ended possibilities, [...] in which people may come to imagine a different order of things" (Bayat 2021, 40). When this happens, ordinary people manage to produce extraordinary events whose social reverberations might go well beyond their immediate political gains. The way in which the revolutionary moment spreads does not occur through the means of contagion or contamination, but rather through "resonance". This implies that the story of a revolution is not just what happens at the top, but also and more importantly what happens at the level of the everyday and the grassroots, overcoming the hegemonic reductionist regime- and state-centered success/failure approaches whereby revolutionary processes in general, and the Egyptian and Tunisian ones in particular, have been predominantly understood. This implies also to shift the focus of the analysis from the elites to the subalterns, intended as both non-elite and non-activist subjectivities, whose agency,

perceptions, and aspirations make up of a substantial part of the revolutionary moment. Last but not least, this implies to look at the affective and relational dimension of the revolution, deeply entrenched in the invisible, yet, fundamental, array of dispersed everyday networks and experiences upon which the feeling of shared destiny and connective agency sediment.

With this in mind, the author starts first with providing a detailed and contextualized overview of the variety of nonmovements where the subalternities object of examination were engaged on the eve of the two uprisings, devoting particular attention to the rural/urban divide (Chapter 2). He then proceeds to dissect the dynamics whereby their dispersed and un-collectivized stances converged and merged together into a transformative, collective quest for "freedom, bread, and dignity", and how their agency directly shaped its form and unfolding (Chapter 3). This was particularly the case of poor and women whose participation, as he thoroughly shows, played a pivotal role in both bringing the "social question" at the center of contention and directly determining the dynamics and repertoires through which the two revolutions articulated. Equally worth of interest is the analysis of the fundamental connective role played by informal and everyday networks such as *shillas*, friends and neighbors, or virtual networks, as well as by what he defines as middle-class poor, whose intermediate positionality between educated elite groups and rural and urban subproletariat enabled the connection of poor and women everyday struggles to the agendas of organized groups (unions, political parties, collectives).

224

The second part of the book (Chapter 4–7) is devoted instead to the detailed exploration of how the poor (Chapter 4), women (Chapter 5), and youth (Chapter 6) figure in the post-revolutionary landscape, to then summarize (Chapter 7) how the two revolutions transformed the social sphere, producing new transgressive imaginaries, subjectivities, practices and ways of living. In so doing, the author never loses sight of the dialectical relation between subalterns' agency and aspirations and changing structural and political context, whose interplay and final evaluations for future political implications make the core of the conclusive chapter (Chapter 8).

What clearly emerges from Bayat's investigation is that while the two revolutions – or *refolutions*, as defined in *Revolutions without Revolutionaries* – undoubtedly failed to produce a regime-change, the same revolutions marked a fundamental cognitive breakthrough whereby, albeit yet again in a disaggregated form, the new "ethics of the entitlement" produced by the subalterns' participation to these historical moments has kept feeding and informing the prosecution of the respective struggles in the post-revolutionary period on a sustained scale, despite the sharp contraction of public freedoms and the disillusionment experienced in both polities. While, in some cases such as Egyptian street vendors, or the informal inhabitants of the *ashwiyat*, this has coincided with an important organizational upgrade, in other cases it has been expressing itself through a variety of less visible, but equally transformative nonmovements involving the collective and private spheres alike, especially for what concerns women.

In conclusion, with *Revolutionary Life*, Asef Bayat marks another groundbreaking milestone for the understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern societies. The book has the great merit to detail and theorize in an accessible yet scholarly solid exposition the social life of the Arab Uprisings in an original and theoretically engaging fashion transcending the sheer sociological and area dimensions and engage the realm of political theory. Equally important, the monograph brings back to the forefront of the scholarly debate on the region and revolutions alike the centrality of the subalterns and their agency in both revolution and area studies, troubling the elite and state-centered paradigms whereby both phenomena are still predominantly approached. Finally, the monograph represents a precious and timely methodological toolbox for scholars to approach and make sense of the so-called "second wave" of Arab Uprisings, whose history is still on the way to be written.

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